# Beyond Binary Places:
# The Social and Spatial Dynamics of
# Coming Out in Canada

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**Abstract**

This article contributes to the growing body of literature linking migration to coming out among gay, lesbian, and other queer individuals. Much of the extant literature frames or imagines these migrations as journeys between sets of oppositional spaces. The common metaphorical trope of moving from inside to outside of "the closet" is frequently equated with moving from a conservative country to a more liberal one or from the homophobic countryside to an accepting metropolis. This discourse abstracts the role of place in coming-out migrations and flattens the complexity of the challenges and concerns that drive them. This analysis of migration narratives among 24 self-identified gay men living in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, frames coming-out migrations as emerging from the complex interplay of individuals' needs and desires and the networks and institutions they occupy *in* places (i.e., the social dynamics of places) and not just a flat "mismatch" between one's sexuality and a place's containerized attributes or characteristics. The discussion elaborates on motivators for coming-out migration influenced by the social dynamics of the places that respondents were both situated in *and* seeking out. These include moving to advance gay life courses perceived to be

stunted, moving to seek anonymity during the coming-out process, and moving to lessen the imagined social and familial burdens associated with coming out.

**Introduction**

Migration as a form of "coming out" among queer[2] people has gained increasing attention in both cultural geography and the popular media. During the past decade, coming out has frequently been framed as a typology of queer migration, one in which the subject and his or her identity are entwined with movement (Brown, 2000; Fortier, 2001; Knopp, 2004; Gorman-Murray, 2007, 2009). In coming out, queer people are thought to leave both a particular geographic space and the spatial metaphor of the closet (Sedgwick, 1990; Brown, 2000). During the past decade, stories of homophobia, discrimination, and flight have appeared in various outlets of the North American media. In a scene of *Milk*, the 2008 film portraying the life of San Francisco city councilman Harvey Milk, the emerging gay rights leader gives the following advice to an anonymous teenager calling him from Minnesota: "There's nothing wrong with you, listen to me. You just get on a bus, to the nearest big city, to Los Angeles or New York or San Francisco, it doesn't matter, you just leave. You are not sick, and you are not wrong and God does not hate you. Just leave." Similarly, the recent "It Gets Better" media campaign, sponsored by The Trevor Project (a U.S. gay youth suicide hotline) and the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), employs celebrities to tell young queer people that their experiences of homophobia and discrimination will dissipate as they gain the opportunity to—among other things—move somewhere else (GLSEN, 2011; Puar, 2010).

These portrayals of coming-out migration, while bringing attention to the depth and persistence of homophobia in North America, are also problematic. As Puar (2010) has observed, they discursively frame moving out to come out as a neoliberal imperative in which flight, rather than meaningful cultural and institutional change, is the solution to homophobia. They also tend to simplify the role of place in generating coming-out migrations. Certain areas (e.g., U.S. "red states[3]," rural regions)—while often the sites of empirically experienced homophobia—are also *discursively* constructed as flatly intolerant places that must be fled while others (e.g., "the big city") are cast as gay or queer homelands. While place certainly informs dual processes of migration and identity disclosure among queer people, it does not always do so in the form of jurisdictionally contained

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[2] In this study, the term "queer" denotes the broader spectrum of sexually non-normative identities—including gay, lesbian, and bisexual—as well as a challenge to discursive assumptions of heteronormativity. Consequently "queer migration" refers to journeys undertaken by queer people that are in some way related to their sexual non-normativity. While the term gay is used specifically to refer to the gay men who are the subjects of this study, "queer" suggests that some stories or experiences that *may* be relevant or applicable to those occupying other non-normative sexual subjectivities. In many cases, however, the "coming out" and migration experiences of lesbian, bisexual, or trans people may be much different.

[3] The term "red state" is commonly invoked in U.S. media to describe state in which the majority tends to vote Republican—denoted by the color red—in national elections.

rights denial or monolithic regional "cultures" of homophobia. Queer people who live in diverse, politically liberal places may still choose to move away if they fear that important relationships will rupture if particular relatives, friends, colleagues perceive their sexual identities to be "deviant" (Olund, 2010; Lewis 2011). Others, perhaps reacting to prevalent coming-out discourses, decide that moving "out" is an essential component of the queer life course. Still others might see a change in location as a way to galvanize the coming-out process. These reasons for moving might appear mundane or commonsense, but the conceptions and perceptions of place employed are somewhat more complex than the binary frameworks that characterize dominant understandings of queer migration within countries.

The following study seeks to inject an appreciation of the social and interpersonal (i.e., a social dynamics of place) into discourses of gay men's migration decisions that are often framed by psychic "mismatches" between gay bodies and the places they occupy or encounter. The importance of social dynamics in coming-out migration is reflected in the following migration narratives gleaned from 24 self-identified gay men, in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada in 2009. First, I discuss the respondents' lack of certainty about their sexual identities or the places moved to or left behind, demonstrating that few coming-out migrations emerge from a clear-cut incompatibility between a particular place and a known, fully formed gay identity. Next, I focus on four key themes of coming-out migration that emerged in these narratives: (1) moving to galvanize a course of personal development perceived as stunted, (2) moving to pre-emptively emplace oneself elsewhere because they fear or anticipate rejection from people around them, (3) moving to seek the anonymity (e.g., social space) needed to develop an identity on one's own terms, and (4) moving to mitigate the perceived "burden" of coming out for families and friends. Together, these four sets of narratives suggest that for many men, coming-out migrations are driven more by the complex webs of relationships, careers, and social lives established in places rather than less nuanced, categorical factors (e.g., rights regimes, rurality) that might be called characteristics of place.

## Toward a Social Dynamics of Place in Coming-Out Migration

Despite the general commitment of sexuality and space studies to feminist and critical approaches that emphasize the fluidity and contingency of individual lives and experiences, the *places* involved in studies of queer migration are often abstracted or reified in certain ways. On one hand, this reification is inherent in the need to describe or identify places as queer-inclusive or homophobic in a fundamentally uneven landscape of rights regimes and social stigma. Queer people themselves may also employ place identifiers (e.g., "conservative," "progressive," etc.) to describe their reasons for moving. At the same time, these discourses—and their adoption and translation by the North American media—may also obscure the more finely variegated ways in which places generate coming-out migrations.

First, increasing attention to heteronormative national immigration laws (Lubhéid and Cantù, 2005; Manalansan, 2006; Lubhéid 2008; Mountz, 2010), and to national regimes of gay and lesbian rights more generally (Lind, 2004; Smith, 2005, 2008), has tended to (1) create a highly *legalized* understanding of places as tolerant or intolerant of sexual non-normativity and (2) reify the nation-state as the primary container of the factors driving queer migrations. In this discourse, countries such as Canada often emerge as protectors of gay rights while others, often those in the developing world, are cast as backward or intolerant (Puar, 2002, 2007). Second, with some notable exceptions (Osborne and Spurlin, 1996; Phillips et al., 2000), the ongoing focus on the metropolis as *the* site of queer lives has created assumptions that most queer migrations *within* countries (including coming-out migrations) are rural-to-urban (Gorman-Murray, 2007). Historic analyses, such as those by Castells (1983), Laqueur (1993), Chauncey (1994), and Aldrich (2004), concretize this relationship by connecting industrialization, urbanization, and rural-to-urban migrations of single men with the emergence of gay male cultures in cities such as London, New York, and San Francisco. With some exceptions (Gorman-Murray 2007, 2009), empirical studies of queer migrations within countries (Weston, 1995; Cant, 1997; Parker, 1999) have also adopted a rural-to-urban focus, reifying coming-out journeys as unidirectional trips between binary places (Lewis 2012).

As Yue (2007) notes, queer migration has typically been characterized as coming out and leaving a heteronormative childhood and a homophobic family home. Dominant discourses, even at a sub-national scale, continue to elide the variety of paths, patterns, and scales of relocation among queer people (Gorman-Murray, 2007, 106). Examining queer migrations not explained through oppositional differences in the characteristics of places requires scaling inward to uncover the complexities of individual decisions and trajectories. Other sexualities geographers have begun the project of complicating the dichotomies of queer migration (e.g., rural/urban, tolerant/intolerant), noting that rural areas, homes, and workplaces have been "queered" as lesbian, gay, and other queer people move to or come out in areas beyond the city (Knopp and Brown, 2003; Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2007; Visser, 2008; Luzia, 2008, 2010). Several have also noted that queer people frequently embrace multiple ideas of "home" and feel comfortable enough in "placelessness" to continue migrating throughout their lives rather than fleeing to one location (Fortier, 2001; Knopp, 2004). In addition, the internet and digital communications have allowed queer people to come out in virtual places, often before or simultaneous with coming out in a physical place (Munt et al., 2002; Bryson et al., 2006).

One approach used to capture the complexity of queer coming-out journeys is to analyze them through the lens or "scale" of the body (Fortier, 2001; Knopp, 2004; Gorman-Murray, 2007, 2009). In this approach, migrations of queer people emerge at the nexus of individuals' identity formation, concepts of home, and embodied desires for emplacement or romantic relationships. Although this scaling

in usefully uncovers the diversity of migration decisions and trajectories among queer people, it tends to position the body—and particularly its emotional responses to place—as the primary driver of the coming-out journey. Places are thus imagined to produce certain matches or incompatibilities with the queer bodies that encounter them, resulting in wandering or "peripatetic" identity quests that bounce from place to place (Knopp, 2004). Yet the genesis of these coming-out journeys is often elided; little attention is given to the intimate connectivities between individualized desires and the particular home, family, workplace, or community dynamics that might produce or mediate migration decisions. Consequently, much of the literature on coming-out migration tacitly reinforces more positivist conceptions of places as "containers" for spatial phenomena (e.g., Hägerstrand 1967, 1970; Brown and Knopp 2006). The highly personal, contingent nature of coming-out migrations, however, would suggest that they emerge from places as defined by complex sets of *social relations* that are anchored in particular times and spaces (Massey 1994) and that—through complex and dialectical processes—produce a sense of being in or out of place (Cresswell 1996). Lynda Johnston's (2007) study of a parade for Scotland Pride in Edinburgh, for example, shows that imagined or expected binaries of prideful places (e.g., the streets where a gay pride parade takes place) and shameful ones (e.g., a city otherwise known to be "conservative") become complicated by relational, interpersonal interactions. As the parade encounters groups of disinterested or even hostile onlookers, the parade participants' feelings of pride—and the parade space itself—become punctuated by shame. The narratives in this study show that the places mediating the disclosure of sexual identity, far from containers that can be categorized as homophobic, accepting, prideful, or shameful, represent sets of relations that are contingent, subjective, sometimes contradictory, and always in flux.

**Moving Out and Coming out in Canada**

Canada, with its frequent characterization as a tolerant, progressive, "gay-friendly" country, is especially in need of a more nuanced intervention into the role of place in coming-out migration. For more than a decade, Canada has been celebrated for its gay marriage and adoption legislation, a baseline of federal gay rights recognition (i.e., through the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms[4]), and the rights-seeking mode of activism through which these changes have occurred (Lind, 2004; Smith, 2005; Lewis 2011). Canada decriminalized homosexuality in 1968, though the legislation maintained that homosexual acts could only occur between two people over the age of 21—more restrictive parameters than those for heterosexual citizens (Kinsman, 1996; Smith, 2008). Since this early but tentative first step, Canadian gays and lesbians have made further advancements in securing

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[4] While the Charter does not specifically include sexual orientation in its list of grounds for claiming equal rights, it leaves an opening for sexual orientation to be added as another immutable personal characteristic (like visible minority status or sex), on the basis of which equal rights cannot be denied. This recasting of sexual orientation as an unchangeable attribute opposes the freedom of sexual identity advocated by many queer liberationists.

rights by leveraging (e.g., through court cases) the Charter.  In the 1995 landmark case Egan vs. Canada, the Supreme Court deemed sexual orientation one of the immutable characteristics under which equal rights must be granted.  Subsequent cases (see Smith, 2005, 2008) granted gay and lesbian citizens public- and private-sector employment benefits for same-sex partners (Rosenberg v. Canada, 1998), the right to disseminate and publish material depicting same-sex relationships (Chamberlain v. Surrey School Board, 2002), and marriage rights (Halpern et al. v. Canada, 2003). Focusing on the Canadian state, however, promotes a myth of geographically uniform "federal" support for sexual non-normativity and threatens to obscure the diversity of Canadian coming-out experiences and migrations generated by the admittedly uneven and inconsistent contours of inclusion and tolerance within Canada and the various towns, cities, and regions that comprise it[5].

Although several studies on both the historical emergence of urban queer homelands (Laqueur, 1993; Chauncey, 1994) and queer migrations within countries such as the United States (Weston, 1995), Britain (Cant, 1997), Brazil (Parker, 1999), and Australia (Gorman-Murray, 2007, 2009; Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2010) have "scaled in" from the nation-state to consider factors driving queer migrations within countries, Canada has been absent in this discourse. While studies on Montreal (Podmore, 2001; Ray, 2004), Toronto (Nash, 2005; Bain and Nash, 2007) and Vancouver (Miller, 2005) have begun to examine the local particularities of Canadian queer histories, spaces, and lives, the ongoing focus on Canada's three largest cities reinforces assumptions that any variations in the support and inclusion of queer identities that *do* exist in Canada are purely urban-rural in nature. In addition, Canada tends to merit more attention for the provisions of equal rights assumed to attract queer migrants from *outside* the country (LaViolette, 2003), rather than the regional or local variations in policy, culture, or social life that might drive queer migrations within the country.

This Canadian case study therefore provides an intervention into the particularities of gay men's intra-national migrations in a country where, aside from notable interventions (Nash, 2005; Bain and Nash, 2007), gay and lesbian inclusion is often imagined by policymakers as a "national" value even as it remains a divisive and geographically contingent issue on the ground (Heath, 2003). The following narratives of gay men's coming-out migrations complicate the Canada-as-vanguard discourse in two ways. The first is to focus on the everyday aspects of queer migration. As the forthcoming narratives will demonstrate, gay men—even in an ostensibly "tolerant" country—continue to move in order to form identities, navigate difficult social and familial relationships, and find opportunities to create the particular type of life they are seeking. Their

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[5] Celebrating Canada as an arbiter of gay rights, in addition to obscuring the more complex and diffuse ways that homophobia permeates Canadian places and lives, also ignores Canada's frequent gaps and lags in the defense of a broader spectrum of queer rights. Canada has failed in many cases to recognize the rights of transgendered people (Cowan, 2005; Lamble, 2009) and several sub-national jurisdictions have faced difficulty in establishing gay-straight alliances and anti-bullying measures in schools (Walton, 2004).

migrations are as often the products of decisions and processes occurring in everyday spaces of the college campus, the family home, the suburb, and the city itself, as they are responses to threats of homophobia, outright discrimination or physical violence[6]. As Gavin Brown (2008, 1223) observes, processes such as coming out, relocating, and living an openly gay life are sometimes less acts of transgression than they are mundane, everyday events. Focusing on the everyday does not negate the gravity of deciding to relocate, but offers an entrée into a more nuanced understanding of how place informs the coming-out migration process.

The second way in which this study complicates understandings of queer migration is by examining coming-out journeys that have resulted in migration to a mid-sized city known more as a conservative "government town" than as a cosmopolitan center or gay homeland (Andrew, 2007; Lewis, 2011). Ottawa was chosen as one of the case study sites for the project (along with Washington, D.C., U.S.A.) due to its non-primate status and frequent elision from Canadian sexuality and space research that focuses mostly on the "MTV" cities of Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver (see also Tiffany Muller Myrdahl's article in this issue). In addition to filling a geographic gap in the literature, focusing on Ottawa also addresses some conceptual gaps. First, it offers an opportunity to interrogate hierarchies of "queer diffusions" that position a few large metropolitan areas as the destinations to which gay men gravitate (Brown and Knopp, 2003). Second, focusing on the government town of Ottawa allows for some consideration of how the institutional makeup of places might contribute to gay men's migration decisions.
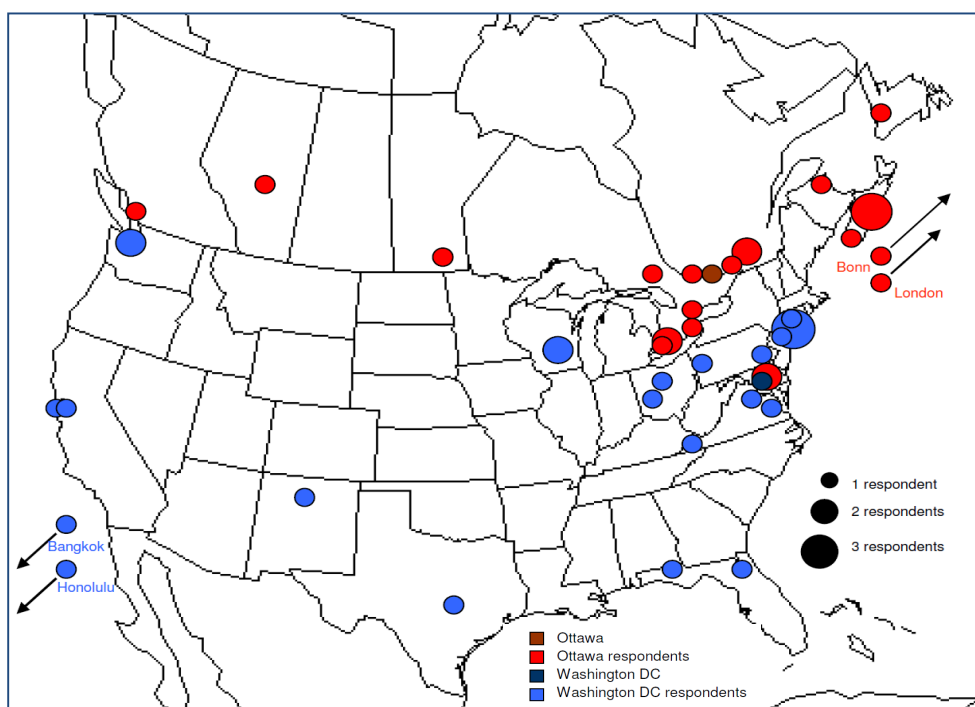
**Methods**

The findings of this paper are drawn from 24 in-depth interviews conducted with self-identified gay men aged 24–59 and living in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Most had moved from the Atlantic Provinces (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador) or from northern, eastern, and southwestern Ontario (see Figure 1). Another four interviews with community leaders, service providers, and health professionals were conducted to gain additional contextual data about gay men's relocations to Ottawa and their experiences thereafter. Interviewees were recruited through respondent-driven snowball sampling, a process in which two or three interviewees (contacted through either a service organization or through an existing social connection with the researcher) gave several references for potential interviewees (Frank and Snijders, 1994). As the sample grew, parameters for ethno-racial, age, income and

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[6] This is not intended to elide or underplay the very real threat of violence and harm that many queer people experience in the day-to-day contexts of particular spaces (e.g., streets, schools) and in jurisdictions with anti-gay policies and practices. Indeed, many queer people in these circumstances, as well as those with limited income or mobility, may not be able to migrate at all.

locational (i.e., point of origin) diversity were controlled to garner greater variety of stories and viewpoints[7]. This approach adopts the individual as the unit of

analysis (Sparke, 1996) and uses the respondent's experiences as a point of departure for a more complex understanding of the dynamics of migration decision-making among men who identify as gay (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Since the sample is non-probabilistic, however, it cannot claim representativeness for all gay men or for bisexual, lesbian, or trans people who may have much different coming out or migration experiences. The 24 interviews with self-identified gay men lasted 50–75 minutes each and were fully transcribed by the author and coded in a two-stage process. Themes were determined by the discourse and terminologies employed by respondents. Coming out, the focus of this paper, was one of the most common primary themes. More specific concepts, such as the social and familial burden of coming out, were categorized as sub-themes.

**Figure 1. Place moved from, Sample of Self-identified Gay Men, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, 2009 (n=24)**

Self-identified gay men are the focus of this study for three reasons. The first is methodological. In acknowledging the personal nature of fieldwork, this study focuses on gay men to provide opportunities for more in-depth and meaningful conversations between the respondents and the author, a self-identified gay man who has lived in both cities (England, 1994). Second, gay men have been the central subjects of previous studies linking their locational decisions with nebulous attributes of place such as creativity and cosmopolitanism (Puar, 2002; Florida, 2002) or with consumption of the "non-child" amenities (e.g., nightlife, high-cost housing) found in certain places (Cooke and Rapino, 2007). A study on the social dynamics of coming-out migration therefore complicates assumed associations between gay men, spending power, and consumption in urban environments. Third, gay men have also been central in the related discourse of "homonormativity" (see Duggan, 2002; Nast, 2002), which assumes that the rise of both neoliberal economic logic and rights-based models of gay activism (for which Canada is well known) has rendered some queer people (e.g., white, upwardly mobile gay men) easily assimilable into mainstream society while others are excluded. The majority of the men in this study are professionals (e.g., civil servants), about three-quarters of them are white, and many of them—at a surface level—engage in some of the practices of "consumption and domesticity" assumed to mark homonormative lives. Following Sothern (2004) and Oswin's (2005) calls to examine the nuances and variations in ostensibly homonormative or "complicit" lives, the following narratives reveal that gay men—even those in privileged positions—are still subject to the pressures and ruptures created by coming out as gay.

## "There was probably a Little Voice in me": Recognizing Difference, Planning Journeys

The discourse of displacement, flight, and emancipation that has characterized much of coming-out migration literature to this point aptly portrays the difficulty of disclosing a non-normative sexual identity in societies where rights, stigma, and discrimination are experienced in spatially uneven and socially contingent ways (Puar et al., 2003). Yet it also flattens the variations in coming-out migration likely to occur in situations where a migrant's location (e.g., in a jurisdiction where his or her rights are protected) and individual subjectivities (e.g., economic privilege or family support) may result in a more gradual, carefully planned journey (or no journey at all) rather than an urgent, once-and-for-all flight. Most men described two common experiences: a fuzzy, fragmented, and sometimes "subconscious" awareness of their sexuality and a careful yet equally uncertain process of assessing gay life potentials of various destinations (Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2010).

Prior to embarking upon their coming-out journeys, many men experienced an "inkling," "feeling" or "voice" making them aware of their sexual difference. While four of the men interviewed in Ottawa had purposely migrated shortly after coming out to leave an unsupportive environment (e.g., "I moved to get away from my parents"), most were unable to identify a specific progression from coming out

to moving out (or vice versa). Many men indicated that even while they had not self-disclosed a gay identity to others or even themselves, they still reasoned that moving away would be helpful in managing the potential process of coming out. Francis[8] (31, white, French-Canadian) who had moved from northern New Brunswick to Ottawa for university remembered: "There was probably a little voice in me that was saying, "It's time for you to go' ... as I said, I probably didn't know it was that voice [i.e., one related to his sexuality] at the time." Others indicated that moving away might have been a subconscious way to galvanize coming out. David (55, white, Anglo-Canadian), who left Ottawa for law school in England before returning several years later, agreed that "[coming out] would have been harder [in Ottawa] ... It probably would have happened … but, yeah, [moving away] helped ... not consciously, but in hindsight." Coming-out migrations might emerge, then, not from a clear-cut, empirically experienced incompatibility between sexuality and place, but from below-the-surface feelings of uncertainty, fear, and the perceived need to tack back and forth between places during a potentially disruptive process.

For most men, choosing *where* to go was an equally gradual, ad hoc process contingent upon the historical factors involved in their individual life courses (see Kertzner et al., 2001; Barker et al., 2006). Men who had moved away while coming out during the 1980s or 1990s relied on personal contacts to glean information about potential destinations. In contrast, men who had moved out and come out more recently had frequently "tested" various destinations (or their sexuality itself) through online research and communication. In both scenarios, men's moves were neither clear-cut "displacements" (Puar et al., 2003) nor nebulous "wanderings" (Knopp, 2004), but rather measured decisions about where to go. Gorman-Murray (2009) ascribes this process of going *somewhere* (i.e., moving to a specific destination rather than just "getting out") to the "gravitational" pull of real or imagined communities located elsewhere. Rather than simply assuming the city to be a site of liberation, most respondents actively collected knowledge in order to make a decision about where to come out. Mark (49, white, Anglo-Canadian), who moved from Newfoundland to Ottawa in the 1990s, relied on the experience of a friend who had made the same move: "It was more of a gut thing; but okay, he went there and maybe this will work out for me." Mark's journey, while still carefully reasoned out, was similar to the sight-unseen encounters with queer places that Weston (1995) catalogues in her work on gay men's and lesbians' journeys to neighborhoods such as San Francisco's Castro in the 1960s and 1970s.

In contrast, younger men—who had in most cases only moved a few years prior to being interviewed—had used the internet to weigh the gay life potentials of

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[8] Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the respondents. Basic age and ethno-racial data is provided with each pseudonym to provide a sense of the respondent's positionality. Other relevant details of respondents' coming-out migrations (e.g., place of origin and time period of the migration) are provided in the text.

places. Men who were beginning university around the time they began coming out (or indeed, had decided not to come out *until* attending university) had typically researched the environments of both individual schools and the places they were located in. Daniel (28, white, French-Canadian), who moved to Ottawa from a town about an hour away, said, "I was looking not just at the schools but the cities around them." In addition to finding a Canadian Studies program in a French-speaking city, he "wanted to go where there were other gay people." He tested Ottawa as a potential destination by going online to find out whether his proposed university had a queer student group, whether there were gay organizations and bars in Ottawa, and whether networking sites such as gay.com listed a large number of profiles for the city. Even migrations that might be considered uneventful or ordinary, such as Daniel's, still involve moments of recognition in which the emergence of sexual difference becomes something to be negotiated, managed, and planned for. Yet the self-recognition of difference does not necessarily create an immediate or urgent desire to leave. Mark, for example, struggled with the idea of leaving behind the tight, close networks he had created in Newfoundland:

> There were compensating factors, though [to wanting to move to Ottawa] … that was the difficulty of it because, you know, family was very close, and it's always a big, emotional thing to sort of, you know, people when you leave the island … it's not a happy situation, you know, but it happens all the time … it's an emotional, wrenching thing … and for the families left behind, particularly. (Mark, 49, white, Anglo-Canadian)

As Mark's narrative demonstrates, coming-out migrations are perhaps less frequently knee-jerk flights than they are complex, uncertain and often emotionally fraught processes. Many men were faced with weighing shifting subjectivities (e.g., changing sexual identities, personal development trajectories) against the maintenance of relationships and support networks that had—to a certain point—felt stable and secure. In addition, their journeys arose from mixtures of subjective and objective factors; for example, a fuzzy sense of the need to leave combined with very conscious, reasoned research on where, specifically, might be the best place to go.

### "Waiting for things to Happen": Moving Out to Move Forward

Most men who moved to Ottawa as part of a coming-out journey felt that the place they were living, regardless of its size or other characteristics, fell short in providing the social supports or life conditions they would need to overcome the stasis of "the closet" (Knopp, 2004; Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2010). While few men felt that their respective local networks would be openly hostile to their disclosure of being gay, many felt hampered by the lack of figures (e.g., role models) that could provide support during the coming-out process and by pressure to maintain the status quo in relationships established under an ostensibly "straight"

identity. Consequently, five of the men interviewed felt that their lives were in some ways contracting or becoming stunted in the places they left. These respondents discussed their feelings of stasis, specifically "treading water," "waiting for things to happen," and "missing out" on the social life and opportunities for personal development that they expected to encounter in a different place.

These respondents perceived a narrowing of social connections when they began coming out or planning to come out, usually because they were not "comfortable being close to people" or felt "guarded and distant" from the people they had been friends with to that point. Several also felt that their romantic lives would not progress if they did not move either because they feared they would never come out or because opportunities for relationships would be limited. Sebastian (38, white/Métis, Acadian, Mik'maq), who moved to Ottawa from southern Nova Scotia, stressed the difficulty in "learning to date in your twenties rather than in your teens" and the challenge of "doing things that are age-appropriate at an age-appropriate time." His observations reinforce the centrality of migration in the life courses of many gay men, suggesting that location might not only render them "out of place" (Cresswell, 1996), but also temporally "out of synch" with their heterosexual peers (Kertzner, 2001; Halberstam, 2005; Barker et al., 2006). Changing locations and, by extension, revising and reworking interpersonal networks can serve as a way for gay men to synchronize their life course with their peers or reset a life course that feels stalled.

Migrating to Ottawa for most men was not a decision based solely on the "push" of an environment perceived as constraining, but also on a variety of carefully reasoned "pulls." On one hand, they considered the dominant trope of size (of both the city and the imagined gay community) in their decisions about where, specifically, to initiate a coming-out process. For eight of the respondents, the attraction of Ottawa was the density of social connections compared to the places they moved from—being "bound to run into [other gay] people" or "be in contact" with gay men. It was in a city, some said, that they felt they could build a group of friends through many different pathways (e.g., work, socializing, clubs and organizations), with less selectivity about the disclosure of their sexual identity. For a few, the presence of a commercial gay village—something available only in the "MTV" cities—was an important precondition for coming out. Raymond (31, black, Jamaican-Canadian), who purposefully stayed in his hometown of Toronto during university instead of moving elsewhere, said that it was important that he have the city's Church Street village as "a place to come out *in*." But despite the power of the "big city" trope in coming-out discourses, few men assumed that moving to a large, urban space in and of itself was the panacea for coming out. Some chose Ottawa specifically for its smaller size and perceived social accessibility, rather than Toronto, Montreal, or other cities that might be seen as more likely destinations in the hierarchy of "queer diffusions" (Knopp and Brown,

2003; Brown 2008). Rick, who moved from northern Ontario to Ottawa for a job in gay advocacy, said:

> I think [Ottawa's] appealing to Canadian, particularly rurally situated gay men, because it's a large center but it's also a stepping stone between a city the size of Calgary or obviously Toronto or Montreal or Vancouver. So … I think that for men that are looking for a step ... there's a lot of transition and Ottawa's seen as a transition city for a lot of gay men. (Rick, 27, white, Anglo-Canadian)

The diffuse yet fairly visible presence of "gay life" *throughout* Ottawa was attractive to many respondents, especially those who viewed the inadequacy and marginality of gay space in their previous homes as signifiers of peripheral social status and as a detractor to their comfort and security (Visser, 2008; Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2010). In contrast to studies (e.g., Weston, 1995) that paint the readily definable gay ghetto or village as a beacon to which gay men might gravitate, men in this study tended to be attracted to the widespread *institutionalization* of gay space in Ottawa in terms of services, organizations, and especially employment (see also Andrucki and Elder, 2007; Lewis, 2011)[9]. Many men deemed institutionalized (though not necessarily geographically concentrated) forms of gay space, such as visible community health centers and civil-service sponsored happy hours, to be welcome alternatives to "fringe," "trashy," "sleazy" or "over-sexualized" spaces they felt they had left behind (Weston, 1995; Visser, 2008; Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2010). Mark (49, white, Anglo-Canadian), who had moved from Newfoundland in his late twenties remembered, "... there was a bar in St. John's when I was coming out, so I would go there a few times, but it was kind of a seedy, you know, back-door kind of place at the time." In contrast, Ottawa, while lacking the expansive, commercialized gay villages of Toronto and Montreal, was seen as providing reasonably central and visible gay establishments and services. Luke (24, white, French-Canadian) compared the availability and visibility of gay organizations throughout Ottawa with the marginal spaces they occupied in his hometown in the Niagara region of Ontario: "… they are a lot more nurturing; they're a lot more kind of spread out throughout the city, so you don't have to go scoping out some little basement room in a church."

Other men were attracted to Ottawa because of its position as a national capital and "government town," despite a history of hostility toward gay men and a reputation for promoting conservative and disciplined identities—especially in the workplace (Lewis, 2011). In particular, they were encouraged by the visible presence of gay men and other queer people in the civil service, prominent political positions, and organizations such as the Canadian Red Cross. Adrian (56, Black, Afro-Canadian), who moved to Ottawa from Halifax, Nova Scotia, said, "You can

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[9] Incidentally, the City of Ottawa designated six blocks of the city's Bank Street as the city's official gay village in November 2011.

probably be as out as you want to be in Ottawa, because of the structure of Ottawa … the environment, that political structure. Regardless of … what type of government we have in, we, as a community, are everywhere in this city." Adrian's comment highlights the role of gay space beyond pubs, clubs, and other elements of the "scene" (Valentine and Skelton, 2003) in both generating coming-out migrations and fostering diverse, wide-ranging interpersonal networks for the men who move there. When considering where to come out, gay men in this study appear to consider the visibility of queer people in public and professional spaces—not just leisure spaces—and pay particular attention to the ways that queer identities are valued, rated, and made visible or invisible (Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2010; Catungal and McCann, 2010).

### "There is that Fear …": Moving due to Possible Rejection

Given the geographically uneven nature of anti-gay and anti-queer stigma associated, even in ostensibly "tolerant" countries such as Canada, many men struggle with balancing or managing the temporal, locational, and social contexts of coming out. While fear is central to traditional narratives of coming out and moving away, it is often described as an emotion rooted in empirically experienced discrimination or even threats of harm (Puar et al., 2003; Valentine et al., 2003; Barton, 2010). In this study, men's coming-out migrations were informed less by clear-cut experiences of marginalization than by internalizing stigma in a way that led them to believe they would be rejected by families and friends. Four of the respondents had moved in anticipation of some form of social rejection, and most had attempted to collect cues from others to determine whether they might ultimately be excluded from the interpersonal networks they had established in a particular place. Terry, who moved to Ottawa from southwestern Ontario, explained that his fears of rejection were less informed by the attributes of the place where he grew up than by aspects of his family life, and the historical context of his parents' emigration from Europe:

> But, um, my parents and certainly my dad when they left [Belgium] in the '60s, kind of maintained the social mores of that time and, and so, you know, you do see that whereas the country moved on but, you know, [my parents] didn't ... but you know [I was] always fearful that they would reject you—which didn't happen in my case but there is that fear—and, um, close family, and so that … that's a factor. (Terry, 40, white, Flemish-Canadian)

Terry's narrative suggests not only that coming-out migrations are often influenced more by the uncertainties and contingencies of interpersonal relationships and networks *in places* than by qualities of places themselves, but that relocating is a way to provide some assurance of fitting in *somewhere*—even if not in the place left behind. Interestingly, few respondents found that their fears of rejection were realized. Randall (45, black/Aboriginal, Afro-Canadian, Mik'maq) reflected on deciding to leave Nova Scotia and finding out years later that his

mother was accepting of his sexuality, or at least indifferent to it. "I was worried that I was being deceitful, because, you know, an omission is as bad as, you know, a contrivance, isn't it? But um, you know … [if I moved away] I wouldn't have to confront that?" For Randall, putting space between himself and his family while he came out bypassed the pressure to lie he would have experienced had he stayed at home and continued interacting with his family on a more regular basis. Like Randall, Mark found the confidence to come out "at home" in Newfoundland only after establishing a life in Ottawa:

> I think being away actually helped, that I felt able to [come out to family] eventually. Um it took, took a while, I would, you know, I told sisters first and then, and then … but feeling grounded, more grounded that I was confident enough to have that—those conversations, and knew they wouldn't be devastating to me. But ... I did ... get an identity that I was comfortable with and that felt confident in, and then felt empowered to be strong enough to tell my parents when I knew it was going to be a difficult conversation. (Mark, 49, white, Anglo-Canadian)

Fears about disclosure were thus a key factor in many of these men's decisions to move away from family homes classifiable neither as blatantly homophobic nor unequivocally accepting. Although their fears of outright rejection were not always realized, moving away and coming out *at a distance* created a social safety net in anticipation of a negative coming-out experience and, ultimately, inspired the confidence to come out "back home."

## "I Felt a Little Bit Exposed": Moving Out to Seek Anonymity

Anonymity, or the state of being unknown, has long been central to discourses of moving out and coming out. As noted by Weston (1995, 268), "Relocation, especially of the sort that puts miles between relatives and the person coming out, could itself be the prerequisite for acquiring that desired sense of anonymity." Men and women engaged in coming out might seek distance from a set of "home" communities and identities to both simplify the coming-out process and to establish new relationships, networks, and identities elsewhere (Fortier, 2001). To achieve this, some require a spatial break with families, friends, and institutions to—as one respondent said—"do what they want" and "be what they want" (Sebastian, 42, white/Métis, Acadian, Mik'maq). Among the men interviewed, four respondents indicated that the desire to achieve some degree of anonymity while coming out informed their migration decisions. For them, managing the coming-out process was rendered more difficult by the place-based social networks whose depth, density, and complexity defied the simplicity of an in/out binary (see also Johnston, 2007). Attempting to be "out" in one context (e.g., socially, at bars, or in organizations) and closeted in another (e.g., at work or with family) was a tenuous proposition. For Mark, his position as a teacher at a Catholic school in Newfoundland, coupled with being located in a small town in a

province that had recently experienced a major sexual abuse scandal at a Catholic orphanage, resulted in what Griffith and Hebl (2002) call a "disclosure dilemma:"

> Um, well as a teacher, uh, I felt a little bit exposed. I met people from time to time and I would have people visit my apartment. I was actually living in a small town outside of Corner Brook, um, for a while, and you know I was feeling, that oh okay, this could blow up in my face at some point ... I couldn't be, couldn't have been out at work, and you know, socially there was a real stigma, I think. And I mean in Newfoundland, of course, the whole scandal with the Mount Cashel orphanage and the Catholic Church and everything did have a chill over, I think, gay issues generally. People, you know, made the connections and … the unfortunate connections. (Mark, 49, white, Anglo-Canadian)

In other cases, men moved to escape feelings of exposure and vulnerability among their peers, or to overcome an inability to move forward with the coming-out process while surrounded by peers. Shawn (42, white, French-Canadian), who had moved from northern Ontario to Ottawa in his early twenties, said, "... there was a certain comfort in … being on my own and being able to live my life without the constant scrutiny of others." For others, the objective of the coming-out journey was not simply to flee, but to put significant geographic *distance* between themselves and the social networks in which they had been embedded. Almost employing a principle of distance decay in their coming-out migrations, some men were interested in moving to places with the fewest linkages to their friends and families from home. Francis (31, white, French-Canadian) reflected on his reasons for leaving eastern New Brunswick despite an offer from his parents to pay for university and buy him a car if he stayed: "... Just rumors of somebody being gay there, like the whole city knew, and they were gossiping about it. There's no way I would have lived there … like I'm, I don't have a thick skin enough to handle that." Sebastian felt compelled to leave not just his hometown, but the entire *region*, in an effort to escape the scrutiny of his community:

> For moving [to Ottawa], it would have been the freedom to be able to come out and be who I was. I had a scholarship at Dalhousie [University], I could have gone there for free—I had to work for the same amount of money here—all of my friends who were … who were going to university were going to Halifax … from the year before me, uh, somebody who was in university was seen going in or out of the one gay bar there was in Halifax, then everyone back home knew about it a week later. (Sebastian, 42, white/Métis, Acadian, Mik'maq)

In Sebastian's case, moving to attend an ostensibly liberal, inclusive institution in a nearby city with a visible gay community (i.e., Halifax) was not sufficient; it was more important to be sufficiently far away to be able to manage the coming-out process unilaterally, without threat of gossip or rumor. As both Francis and

Sebastian indicate, anonymity does not require a large city as much as it requires freedom from the sometimes far-reaching social entanglements of families, friends, and communities.

## "So I really do it for my Mother:" Moving Out to Mitigate Social and Familial Burdens

Discourses of coming-out migration often assume that moving away, usually from a parental or family home, is "triggered" by an intolerant or unhealthy home environment (Weston, 1995; Brown, 2000; Binnie, 2004; Barton, 2010). Indeed, a few men had moved because coming out resulted in parental disapproval, the denigration of relationships, and sometimes the temporary or permanent rupture of families. A more common story, however, was one in which men actively chose to move away to mitigate the burden that they felt coming out would impose on family and friends. While few men feared that coming out would result in outright familial disownment or societal exclusion, many worried about the difficulties that families and friends might face in coming out *alongside* them. As Kertzner (2001, 85) notes in his study of gay men in midlife, homosexual identity is often perceived as a "burden that [disrupts] life history." Interestingly, many respondents saw their sexual identity as more of a burden to others than to themselves, and frequently expected that families and friends would perceive their coming out as the "betrayal or trust of a relationship" or the transfer of a social encumbrance (Flowers and Buston, 2001, 59). Some men thus decided to move away to avoid tasking family or friends with acknowledging and sharing that they had a son, grandson, cousin, or friend who was gay. While only one respondent referenced the concept of burden directly, another six respondents discussing the roles of parents and families in their migration decisions elaborated on how they felt that coming out might create difficulty or inconvenience for others.

These perceived burdens were especially overwhelming for men with especially close or dense family relationships. Mark, for example, described his extended family in Newfoundland—one including that included parents as well as aunts, uncles, cousins, friends and neighbors—as simultaneously "warm" and "suffocating":

> Um, I think it was the whole thing of I was closeted, living a closeted existence. My family was there, I had a, you know, a large extended family. I didn't feel I could be out, um, and that was probably the greatest difficulty. I mean I liked it, you know people are warm generally, but I wasn't feeling empowered enough to be, to be out ... I needed that distance and that break, uh, so yeah it was a little … a little suffocating. (Mark, 49, white, Anglo-Canadian)

The burdens of coming out in particular places were often contingent the intersectional subjectivities occupied by both individual men and their networks of friends. For Randall (45, black/Aboriginal, Afro-Canadian, Mik'maq), who moved from Halifax to Ottawa, coming out in a city he described as "very racist," meant

both exacerbating his own "double whammy" of being both black and Aboriginal and unnecessarily burdening his friends, some of whom were racialized and facing their own experiences of discrimination, poverty, and unemployment: "[My friends] had their own shit to deal with, so there wasn't any way I was going to, you know, shovel more on to them. So, you know, what we could sort of provide for each other was kind of limited." Randall's story shows that many men who "move out to come out" consider not only the networks that they are embedded in or seeking out, but the circumstances of the people that comprise those networks and who are ostensibly tasked with coming out alongside their friends and relatives[10].

Some respondents reacted to cues from family members who preferred that they not discuss their sexuality. For Chad, his parents' implied request for silence prompted him not only to leave Nova Scotia, but to continue avoiding any discussion of his sexuality while interacting with them from that point onward.

> It's just an issue of why, why bother at this point. I mean they know I've never had any girlfriend. So I'm kind of going, uh ... but, and they always have to say, "I like things just the way they are." So they give me signals they don't really want to know. But bottom line is I don't … honestly if they asked me I would tell them in a minute. It's they don't really ever … they don't … I get signals from them they don't want to know, so I kind of respect that (Chad, 35, white, Anglo-Canadian).

Despite being "out" in Ottawa, Chad avoids discussing his sexuality not only because of his parents' signals to do so, but because he feels that bringing his sexual identity to the forefront would place a strain on the relationship *between* his parents: "My father's a bit of an ass, so it would make my life—my mother's life—very miserable. So I really do it for my mother more than [myself] … I know what his reaction would be and her living with him would be."

Finally, many men moved away because they were worried about triggering or worsening parents' fears about their safety and well-being while coming out. Several men noted that their parents were concerned about "someone taking advantage" of their son or that their sons would contract HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases after coming out and encountering the "scene" for the first time. Consequently, many men's parents prevented them from utilizing networking tools, such as online social sites and local gay youth organizations that would have otherwise helped them in the coming-out process. While some men felt that their parents' concerns were unfounded, they reasoned that it would be easiest to avoid their protective behaviors by moving:

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[10] Randall's story brings to light the fact that most coming-out migrations are affected in some way by one's racial or ethnic subjectivities, though the degree to which they are emphasized varies from narrative to narrative. Given that coming out is a social and cultural phenomenon, as well as an individual one, there is much to be said about the influence of these subjectivities that is beyond the scope of this article but discussed more extensively in elsewhere (Lewis, 2012).

> It wasn't kind of out of, I think, gratuitous homophobia or willful homophobia, but I guess I think part of it may be that but just a part of it was kind of the parent reflex to protect their kids in whatever situations they may be. Um, and so, in that sense and so they kind of restricted the amount of gay stuff I could do and I think that helped contribute to feeling a sense of sadness and kind of maybe also the desire to move, yeah. (Derek, 31, white, French-Canadian)

Men's accounts of familial and social burdens in the coming-out process demonstrate in yet another way that coming-out migrations in Canada are driven by complex sets of social relations that certain gay men have established *in* places, and not just codified, legalized conceptions of place (i.e., based on policy), or by cultural signifiers such as "backward" and "intolerant."

## The Importance of the Everyday: Seeing the Social Dynamics of Place in Queer Migration

On one level, the narratives discussed here are mundane: they rarely involve the experiences of abuse, harassment, intolerance, and displacement so evident in the North American imaginary of queer migration. Instead, they are largely everyday journeys motivated by personal development, desires for anonymity, fears of rejection, and the management of burdens—factors often glossed over as commonsense. At the same time, these narratives offer a powerful opportunity to re-examine the role of place in queer coming-out journeys. In this research, gay men's migrations were seldom motivated by monolithic conceptions of places as intolerant, homophobic or otherwise "at odds" with their identity. Instead, respondents typically referenced the complex social dynamics of networks (e.g., families, friends) and institutions (e.g., universities, workplaces) that needed to be negotiated as they came out. Many of the places that these men moved from (e.g., Winnipeg, Toronto) are not known to be particularly small, rural, or homophobic, but were rendered discordant with their coming-out processes because of the particular sets networks and relationships that they had established there.

The importance of place-based social dynamics was revealed in each element of coming-out migration discussed. Respondents who sought to "move forward" in their individual life courses as gay men searched not just for large cities with recognizable gay commercial spaces, but to places where gay spaces and identities were central and visible in a diverse set of economic and professional sectors. Gay men who had moved because they feared rejection were not so much fleeing as they were setting up an alternate support networks elsewhere. Gay men seeking anonymity were not simply going to a place where they could be "unknown," but were purposefully disentangling themselves—sometimes with long-distance moves—from the networks through which information might reach family members or friends. The complexity of gay men's coming-out origins and destinations is perhaps most aptly demonstrated in those migrations intended to mitigate or defer familial burdens. In these cases, coming-out migrations were

much less reactions to places than uses of *space* to manage relationships in those places. Collectively, these four sets of narratives demonstrate the multiplicity of "coming outs" that each individual might go through. In this study, few men simply left one life behind and began a new "gay life" elsewhere. For most, "getting out" was perhaps not as important as going to a specific somewhere that would allow for *dual* coming out processes (e.g., both at "home" and in a new place) to be managed simultaneously or in conjunction with one another. Moving to Ottawa was therefore less a means of escaping than it was a means of obtaining a social security net during the unpredictable process of coming out. In choosing to move away, men alleviated fears of being displaced or rejected, established new networks, and gave themselves the freedom to come out on their own timeline.

By extension, the narratives presented here signal the need for a more careful reading of how anti-gay stigma influences coming-out migrations, particularly within countries that are thought to have otherwise gay-positive policies and practices. Canada's relatively progressive stance on gay and lesbian rights does not indicate an absence of anti-gay stigma. Gay men's coming-out migrations—while not necessarily involving the trauma of harassment or violence—were still driven by ongoing understandings of "gay" as a stigmatized or shameful *identity* and the social consequences of disclosing or performing that identity (Johnston, 2007). While coming out rarely emerged as an imperative to leave (e.g., due to fear of harm), many gay men in this research conceived it as enough of a disruption or burden—to both their own lives and those of friends and families—to require managing the process from afar. As scholars in both psychology and geography have observed, anti-gay stigma diffuses not just through "formal" prejudice (e.g., anti-gay laws and discrimination), but also through prejudice events (e.g., incidents of bullying) and the perceptions or experiences of "informal" prejudice from families, friends, and religious or cultural communities, or even individuals casually encountered in public spaces (Cochran, 2001; Johnston, 2007; Lewis, 2009). In this study, gay men's decisions to suppress or conceal a changing sexual identity or to move away while coming out were mediated not just by stigmatizing policies and practices, but by the ways in which anti-gay stigma influenced the social dynamics of the places they inhabited. Stigma must therefore be understood not as an essential characteristic of particular jurisdictions (e.g., more rural provinces or small towns), but as something that diffuses *through* places in complex ways and that affects gay men's lives and mobilities differently according to the individual subjectivities and social positions they occupy.

Even in everyday coming-out journeys, the persistent understanding of sexual difference as something that must be disclosed and negotiated creates environments in which gay men may feel constrained—by parents' or families' fears, by potentially changed social relationships, and by the perception that a gay man must exchange one life for another after disclosing his sexuality. Distance and relocation therefore become tools to manage and control a landscape of familial and social networks that is likely to be re-contoured. Coming-out migration, then, is perhaps

less about an individual identity quest than about the process of defining oneself vis-à-vis networks and communities in different places. Moving out to come out, then, is a relational journey in which identities and networks are simultaneously redrawn. Continued work on the individual experiences of queer people is therefore important to the ongoing project of disentangle the binaries perceived to drive queer migration.

## Acknowledgements

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